

## DECLARATION

I, Matthew T. Greer, declare and state as follows:

I am a Special Agent with the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and have been so employed since March of 2008. I have been assigned to the Raleigh District Office (DO) since May of 2017. I have received extensive training in the area of identifying violations of the Controlled Substance Act, Title 21, and other related offenses.

I have participated in the execution of federal and state search warrants resulting in the seizure of controlled substances, records associated with narcotics trafficking, United States currency (USC) and assets purchased with the proceeds of illicit controlled substances. I have worked with, and recruited numerous informants and interviewed defendants who have been involved in the orchestration of illegal drug trafficking activities. I have testified in proceedings in federal and state court. I have been the affiant on federal search warrant applications and also directed multiple Title III investigations.

The following facts outline the probable cause for the forfeiture of the following property:

- \$50,613.00 in U.S. Currency (USC) seized from Mahmoud Majed ABUILLAN on October 04, 2021

Based on the investigation of the above-mentioned person, the following is known to be true:

### I. BACKGROUND OF THE INVESTIGATION

This investigation of a criminal trafficking organization operating throughout the east coast of the United States was initiated in 2019, and has, thus far, resulted in seizures of USC in excess of \$1,100,000.00. Transportation cells of this organization utilize the interstate highway system to move controlled substances, contraband cigarettes, and bulk amounts of U.S. currency between North Carolina and the northeastern United States.

In April 2021, ABUILLAN was the operator and registrant of a Chevrolet Silverado bearing North Carolina registration FCP 9085 that was the subject of a traffic stop in the southbound lanes of Route 1 by Franklin County (NC) Sheriff's Office (FCSO) deputies. ABUILLAN produced a state of New York drivers license to FCSO personnel that identified his address as 2510 Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn, NY. The vehicle was registered to 1710 Vienna Woods Drive, Raleigh, NC. The vehicle's other occupant was identified as Abdalkarim SALEM, also a New York resident. In excess of \$100,000.00 USC was located in the vehicle, but was not seized as no known criminal nexus was apparent to investigators at that time. Subsequently, Raleigh DO personnel obtained intelligence that ABUILLAN's vehicle, and other vehicles linked to close ABUILLAN associates were frequently traveling to the northeastern United States.

GOVERNMENT  
EXHIBIT  
A

II. OCTOBER 04, 2021 TRAFFIC STOP CONDUCTED BY GRANVILLE COUNTY (NC)  
SHERIFF's OFFICE

On October 04, 2021, pursuant to observations of violations of North Carolina vehicle and traffic law, Granville County Sheriff's Office (GCSO) Deputy Robinson conducted a vehicle stop of the same Chevrolet Silverado that ABUILLAN had been operating in April 2021 when he had been found to be transporting approximately \$100,000.00. This vehicle stop occurred in the vicinity of mile marker 204 on the southbound side of Interstate 85.

Deputy Robinson approached the vehicle and spoke with the operator and sole occupant, ABUILLAN, who confirmed his identity by again producing a state of New York drivers license. Deputy Robinson noted that the Chevrolet Silverado's backseat had been adjusted and there was an air mattress, blankets, and a backpack in the rear area of the passenger compartment of the vehicle. While conducting inquiries of law enforcement databases, Deputy Robinson became aware that ABUILLAN had previously been identified by New York law enforcement personnel during a drug-related investigation. Deputy Robinson engaged ABUILLAN in conversation, and ABUILLAN acknowledged that he was traveling to North Carolina from New York. ABUILLAN stated that he was going to visit his brother who resided in Raleigh. ABUILLAN identified his brother as Ahmed ABUILLAN and provided Ahmed ABUILLAN's mobile phone number as (919) 537-5725. ABUILLAN stated that this visit was expected to be for two or three nights. ABUILLAN confirmed that there was a large sum of USC in the vehicle and approximated its value at \$49,000. ABUILLAN initially stated that the USC was intended to purchase an unspecified, unidentified business with his brother Ahmed ABUILLAN. ABUILLAN then equivocated on this statement, clarifying that he "maybe" would invest the USC with his brother. ABUILLAN continued to make vague and conflicting statements about his employment and the intended purpose of traveling with such a large sum of USC. ABUILLAN stated that he trades cryptocurrency and has brokerage accounts and noted that he has \$20,000.00 in expenses. When asked if that figure was the sum of his monthly expenses, ABUILLAN did not answer the question. ABUILLAN continued to state that he "has connections" and that he did work in warehouses, and works off of commission. When asked if he had receipts documenting the withdrawal of the funds from his accounts, ABUILLAN stated that he had it in his phone, but did not provide his phone for Deputy Robinson to confirm.

A GCSO K-9 Unit was deployed on the vehicle and alerted to the presence of the odor of controlled substances. Deputy Robinson informed ABUILLAN of the positive K-9 alert. ABUILLAN stated that Deputy Robinson could search the vehicle. The search of the vehicle, including the bed of the pickup truck, did not locate any luggage, except for the previously noted backpack. Within the backpack, GCSO personnel located a large sum of USC stacked and held together with rubber bands. But for one pair of athletic shorts, there was no clothing located in the vehicle. ABUILLAN attempted to explain this oddity by stating that he and his brother are the same size and wear each other's clothes. GCSO personnel also located financial documents in ABUILLAN's name and noted the same Raleigh, North Carolina address as the registration of the Chevrolet Silverado, as well as two mobile phones, a bag of rubber bands, and an additional sum of USC in the center console.

Deputy Robinson explained to ABUILLAN that the USC would be seized as suspected illicit proceeds pending further investigation, and invited ABUILLAN to follow him to the GCSO so that



the evidence could be processed, and ABUILLAN could provide additional information and documentation regarding the origins of the USC. Deputy Robinson explained that ABUILLAN would be provided a receipt for any property taken into the custody of the GCSO. ABUILLAN agreed to follow Deputy Robinson to the GCSO.

At the GCSO, a K-9 unit conducted a sweep of three bags, one of which contained the seized USC. The K-9 positively alerted to the bag which contained the seized USC.

After stating to GCSO personnel that he would not leave the premises without his money, ABUILLAN threw himself on the floor and refused to stand up. He grew increasingly agitated, uncooperative, and aggressive. He was ultimately arrested and criminally charged for his actions at the GCSO.

### III. SUBSEQUENT INVESTIGATIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Investigation determined that, in August 2020, ABUILLAN's brother, Ahmed ABUILLAN, filed a report with the Raleigh Police Department which claimed that approximately \$20,000.00 of tobacco products were stolen from a storage unit that Ahmed ABUILLAN had rented. Ahmed ABUILLAN stated that the property belonged to him and his business partner Nizar AL KATEEB. Throughout this investigation, investigators have observed AL KATEEB and other members of this criminal trafficking organization frequently visit rented storage units and utilize these spaces to store cartons of cigarettes. The purpose of utilizing storage units to store and facilitate the transfer of possession of cartons of cigarettes is to avoid law enforcement detection of criminal activity at the wholesaler's place of business. Maintaining an off-site location such as rented storage units for the illicit portion of their business is an attempt by the criminal organization to be discreet and anonymous while conducting contraband cigarette trafficking activity.

Additionally, in February 2021, Ahmed ABUILLAN was interviewed by Raleigh Police Department regarding events related to an armed robbery of approximately \$85,000.00 USC from a vehicle rented by Taisser SHEHADEH that was parked at 5504 Yates Garden Lane, Raleigh, NC. Ahmed ABUILLAN had previously been linked to this address, and SHEHADEH (who is ABUILLAN's father-in-law) currently resides at this address. SHEHADEH and other associates became involved in a car chase with the perpetrators following the robbery. Ahmed ABUILLAN was present and was interviewed by Raleigh Police Department at the scene where the perpetrators' vehicle had been disabled as a result of a collision with a vehicle operated by SHEHADEH associates. A Jamaican national and resident of New York was later apprehended and arrested for the robbery of SHEHADEH. The USC was located, seized as evidence, and subsequently forfeited as criminal proceeds. SHEHADEH, ABUILLAN, and other individuals involved in this incident were noted as uncooperative by Raleigh Police Department detectives charged with investigating the theft of the USC.

In 2017, SHEHADEH was arrested by members of the Carteret County (NC) Sheriff's Office subsequent to a search warrant conducted at SHEHADEH's convenience store. Among other contraband, over an ounce of crack cocaine was seized by law enforcement authorities. SHEHADEH's attorneys repeatedly requested judicial delays claiming SHEHADEH had a heart condition and other



maladies that rendered him unable to participate in the judicial process thus resulting in charges remaining without a disposition for approximately five years. DEA investigators informed prosecutors that SHEHADEH was not only an active member of a criminal trafficking organization, but was regularly observed by surveillance units at locations where said organization operated and healthy enough to engage in high-speed chases with armed assailants. Subsequent to prosecutors presenting these facts to SHEHADEH's attorney, in 2022, SHEHADEH agreed to plead guilty to drug charges and was sentenced to a term of probation of five years.

In February 2023, as part of an investigation being conducted by the Wake Forest (NC) Police Department (WFPD), ROYALE TOBACCO & VAPE, a business known to be owned and operated by Ahmed ABUILLAN and his wife, Sarah SHEHADEH, was suspected to be used to promote criminal activity, including marijuana trafficking, copyright/trademark infringement, and cigarette trafficking. WFPD investigators executed search warrants at this business which resulted in the seizure of THC products, as well as evidence of large-scale cigarette trafficking and trademark infringement.

On February 05, 2023, a clerk at the ROYALE TOBACCO & VAPE advised a WFPD officer, acting in an undercover (UC) capacity, that the store had "behind the counter products that were not legal to sell in North Carolina". The clerk placed them onto the counter and further related that the items were procured from California and that he hid them behind the counter due to their illegal status.

On February 07, 2023, a search warrant was conducted at ROYALE TOBACCO & VAPE. Seized pursuant to the execution of this search warrant were various smoking paraphernalia containing items, wordmarks, and designs associated with brands such as "Louis Vuitton", "Gorilla Glue", "Skittles", and many other protected trademarks and copyrights.

In the front of the store, WFPD investigators located numerous items labeled "THC" or "THC Delta-9". Among these items were THC chocolate bars, THC vape, and THC cigarettes. Investigators noted that all of the THC products seized were more than 90 % THC. A subsequent search of the rear office area of the business, located a large bag in a desk cabinet. Located in this bag were approximately 50 THC pens. The clerk made statements that only the owner (Ahmad ABUILLAN) has access to that rear office area. Also located in the rear office area were approximately 100 half cases of cigarettes with the tops cut off and invoices from a cigarette wholesaler located in Raleigh, NC.

Cigarette trafficking organizations are known to cut the tops of boxes off to make the product easier to transport in bulk quantities. The invoices from the cigarette wholesaler indicated cash sales to Ahmed ABUILLAN and/or his multiple smoke shop businesses aggregating over several million dollars. Nearly all of these invoices were dated in the year 2022.

Ahmed ABUILLAN, SHEHADEH, and AL KATEEB have been regularly seen during surveillance activities at the same cigarette wholesaler's warehouse. At this location, and at a nearby storage unit, investigators have observed AL KATEEB loading cartons of cigarettes into a Ford F-250 with Pennsylvania registration ZNE 8090. Pursuant to this investigation, this vehicle and another vehicle driving in tandem were later the subject of a vehicle stops conducted by law enforcement in the southbound lanes of I-95. A sum of approximately \$92,000.00 USC was seized from the vehicles, a



portion of which was concealed in a void in the air filter compartment. The vehicles' occupants were all residents of Pennsylvania. The seized USC was subsequently forfeited to the U.S. government. Additionally, at the same storage facility noted by Ahmed ABUILLAN in the aforementioned RPD report detailing the theft of his and AL KATEEB's property, AL KATEEB was observed loading a U-Haul truck with Arizona registration. Later on same date, the Maryland State Police conducted a traffic stop of this vehicle and seized over 4000 cartons of contraband cigarettes from a storage unit loading cigarettes

Pursuant to the findings of the WFPD, Ahmed ABUILLAN was later arrested and charged with violations of North Carolina drug trafficking statutes and well as copyright violations. The charges against ABUILLAN are pending. These findings concerning the business of Ahmed ABUILLAN and his arrest are significant as it relates to the asset at issue because, as noted earlier, Mahmoud ABUILLAN, at the time the USC was seized by GCSO, stated that the USC was to be utilized for purported business opportunities with his brother, Ahmed ABUILLAN. Royale Tobacco and Vape was formed in 2021, which was the same time period that Mahmoud ABUILLAN was found to be transporting large sums of USC on multiple occasions.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on my law enforcement training and experience, traffickers in contraband tobacco products purchase large quantities of cigarettes in source areas for tobacco with low tax rates, such as North Carolina and transport them to high-tax jurisdictions, where they are fraudulently marked and stamped as if they had adhered to the regulatory and tax authorities in those jurisdictions. The cash proceeds from these cigarette sales are then transported across state lines back to the jurisdiction with lower tax rates so that the traffickers can purchase additional quantities of cigarettes, transport them to the high-tax jurisdictions, and thus continue this illicit trafficking venture and the laundering of proceeds thereof.

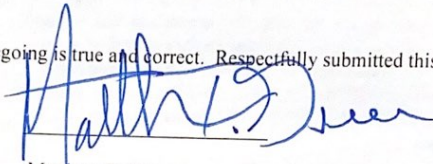
Federal law defines contraband cigarettes as a quantity in excess of 10,000 cigarettes, which is equivalent to 50 cartons. 18 U.S.C. § 2341. Fifty cartons of cigarettes can be purchased in North Carolina for approximately \$2,800 and sold in higher tax rate jurisdictions such as those typically found in the northeastern United States for a considerable profit. The quantities of cigarettes and amounts of USC that have been interdicted during this investigation all indicate that this organization is trafficking contraband quantities of cigarettes in violation of multiple federal statutes.

Similarly, drug traffickers transport controlled substances northbound and proceeds derived from drug distribution southbound. Previous investigations and seizures of cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin; indicate that North Carolina, and other areas of the southeastern United States; have become a significant base of operations for high-level Mexican drug trafficking organizations. After arriving in North Carolina from the southwest border area, multiple kilogram quantities of controlled substances are often sent north via the interstate system to New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and other population centers with high rates of drug abuse. The similarities of the infrastructure, conveyances, distribution networks, and the overall dynamics of drug trafficking and cigarette trafficking activity have resulted in a symbiotic relationship between overlapping criminal organizations, as the contraband

cigarette trade has become a convenient vehicle for the laundering of all manner of criminal proceeds, including proceeds derived from the transportation and distribution of controlled substances.

As Mahmoud ABUILLAN has been previously known to transport large sums of USC, and based on his own statements that he intended to invest the USC at issue with his brother, Ahmed ABUILLAN, a known member of a criminal trafficking organization; probable cause exists to believe that the U.S. currency seized in the course of this investigation represents proceeds of illegal activities, that is, trafficking in contraband cigarettes and/or controlled substances, and is, therefore, subject to forfeiture to the United States pursuant to Title 18, U.S.C. section 981(a)(1)(C) and/or Title 21, U.S.C. section 881.

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct. Respectfully submitted this 26<sup>th</sup> day of June, 2023.



Matthew T. Greer  
Special Agent  
U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration